When In Rome: A Comparative Analysis Between Popular Entertainment in Ancient Rome and Modern America

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Abstract

The Roman Empire (roughly 27 B.C. to 476 A.D.) has historically received a bad reputation due to the Romans' favored forms of entertainment. The popular combination of amusement and affliction, specifically within such venues as the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus, has labeled the Romans as a barbaric and tasteless people. Many historians condemn the Romans for their unrestrained passion for pleasure and excess as well as their savage shows. Before their fall, the imperial Romans led an advanced and successful society. Key elements of their culture were highly conducive to and representative of their acute attraction to violence. Contemporary America shares many cultural characteristics with ancient Rome, which are reflected in modern media. The following analysis will help identify why the Romans craved violence in entertainment and explore how similar factors still influence audiences today.

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Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my mother, Dorothy, for keeping me sane and offering me endless encouragement throughout the research and writing process.

Author's Statement

I was blessed to have the opportunity to live in Florence, Italy for the fall semester of 2015. My experiences abroad opened my mind to the rich cultures that span ages beyond the relatively limited history of America. I was especially in awe of the Roman Empire, a magnificent nation that endured well over double the existence thus far of my own, and its continued influence from ancient times to today. Traversing the Colosseum in Rome was perhaps the most profound and memorable of my explorations abroad. Even in the now dusty and decrepit ruins, it was impossible to not be enraptured by the sheer magnitude of the site and the knowledge of the incredible events once held within its walls. I ached to learn more of the notorious people who slaughtered millions without shame. I wanted to understand what could possibly motivate an entire culture to openly accept and practice merciless torture for entertainment. Surely, I figured, this dynamic and powerful society was driven by more than simply violence for the sake of violence. I therefore set out to determine why the Romans lived the way they did. I was not surprised to find that the society was very militaristic and that violence was a common fact of life for the average citizen. I *was*, however, surprised to discover so many connections between the ancient Romans and my own culture.

As a millennial, I have been raised in the Intellectual Age. I have never known a world before personal technology. In a way, my generation is conquering a new and uncharted territory through the realm of multimedia. We have yet to reach a point in which we can accurately assess and critique the impact our dependence upon technology with have upon our generation and the generations to follow. I feel, at least, some issues are already beginning to emerge. I live in a society in which young minds are developing behind the constant glow of computer screens, fingers on keyboards communicate far more rapidly than words on lips, and distance has

changed from an obstacle to nothing more than a specification. The biggest change I have witnessed is that my generation is obsessed with entertainment. We demand immediate information and amusement. We are highly individualistic; putting our own needs before all else, we have little patience for any option other than our own desires. When I look back, I find it difficult to compare my generation to any before us. I was shocked to recognize a close connection to a people that lived nearly two thousand years ago!

Walking through the ruins of Rome forced me to see the potential for ruin in my own generation. We, like the imperial Romans, are leading a culture in America where pleasure is paramount and excess is the norm. We want everything to be larger than life. We demand endless amusement and do not react well to not getting our way. It was not until I began researching the common elements of indulgence between our two cultures that I also realized our shared satisfaction through violence. We watch extremely violent content on television, in movies, and in video games. We enjoy violence just as much as the Romans did; however, we have the convenient technology of animation, CGI, and other special effects to help us justify our carnal cravings. Why do we shamelessly recreate violent acts for our entertainment today? We are so quick to judge the Romans but we would, arguably, resort to similar methods of amusement if we were devoid of our modern means of distraction and entertainment.

The Romans used the arena as a medium to escape from the reality of their chaotic world. Today, our arena has evolved into virtual diversion through television and the Internet. Sure, no one is visibly being hurt, but I believe that there is still significant damage being done. In the following analysis, I do not intend to criticize modern media but rather to encourage others to critique their own habits. I hope this thesis sparks further discussions of our connection to the Roman world.

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Society

The social atmosphere of ancient Rome greatly influenced the disposition of its citizens. Ancient Rome was a society plagued by relentless tensions. The majority of citizens lived well below the poverty line and an extremely small few held all of the wealth. Life expectancy was relatively low and most citizens struggled to sustain themselves. The empire retained control over a dramatically diverse populace across the Mediterranean and beyond. In a constant battle for imperial control, Rome became heavily militaristic. Pressures arose abroad as well as from a rigid internal class system and a strict regime of Roman values. Romans may have seemed prosperous but, in reality, most suffered from immense stress day to day. The barbaric arena games, of which the Romans are known, did not originate out of pure hatred and unwarranted bloodlust. Many societal variables contributed to the eventual institution of violent entertainment. The games merely followed the pattern of existing norms in the Roman Empire.[1] For this they were successful. Ultimately, the infamous events that took place within the circus and the arena were no more than a reflection of the world in which the Romans lived.

Numerous archaeological finds have profoundly aided our comprehension of life in ancient Rome; however, what knowledge we have of this remarkable society is limited. The majority of literary sources available are narrow in scope covering topics pertaining mostly to wealthy white men of political position.[2] Free, white men sat at the top of the social pyramid. Similar to today's culture, the elite owned roughly 80 percent or more of the empire's entire wealth although they made up less than 1 percent of the population.[3] This imbalance is made manifest in their domination of literary sources. It is rare to find writings from members of the

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[1] Fik Meijer, and Liz Waters. *The Gladiators*, 194.
[2] Jo-Ann Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, viii.
[3] Robert C. Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 6.

lower classes. The written word generally belonged to the wealthy with the means to either write down their own accounts or to pay someone else to. For this reason, the story of the average Roman citizen is difficult to find. We can only speculate the daily doings of the commoners from what artifacts we have collected such as letters, household items, graffiti, written transactions, and tombstone inscriptions—ultimately, the more mundane pieces of their lives. These, coupled with the writings of the elite, shed at least some light upon what we can assume was the general atmosphere of life in ancient Rome.

Rome is believed to have begun in 753 B.C. as an agrarian society. Drawing from their agricultural ancestors, the most esteemed societal values of the Roman Empire evolved from the basic principles of farm life: "diligence, determination, austerity, gravity, discipline, and self-sufficiency."[4] In all activities, both work and play, the Romans were meticulous. Laziness was greatly frowned upon. It was paramount to be productive. Whether you were a lower class individual working hours in the sun or a wealthy magistrate brooding in the shade over new policies, idleness was inexcusable. In the most basic terms, the Roman-ideal stood upon the principle that rural values led to great imperial success. Those who stayed grounded in the Roman way would surely triumph over all obstacles. Romans believed that, aside from fighting for sustainability, their agrarian ancestors were war heroes who conquered all of Italy.[5] Internally, the empire was subject to constant fluctuation of power and, externally, was always in a state of war regardless of present threats. Keeping with their ancestral values, imperial Rome ceaselessly trained soldiers. Military service was required of every boy at the age of seventeen and often became a lifelong career.[6] Discipline and obedience was key. Romans were trained to

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[4] Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 4.
[5] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*,164.
[6] J.P.V.D. Balsdon. *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome*, 160.

conceal their feelings.[7] The society as a whole took on a very militaristic nature. People followed orders, lived according to rank, and, when necessary, adversaries were brutally punished. The military was a dominant presence throughout the entire empire. Garrisons were stationed throughout the territories and were in charge of securing Roman control, assimilating different cultures to the Roman way, and, ultimately, keeping the peace.

We know Rome was a very diverse society. Akin to the United States today, the Roman Empire was the melting pot of the ancient world. At its height, Roman control encompassed modern day Spain, Gaul, Italy, Greece, Macedonia, Judea, Asia Minor, and Egypt as well as some other portions of North Africa and most of Britain. Such a wide territory is difficult to control under one regime, especially without a universal language. Greek and Latin were the most common in and around the city of Rome but most of the farther imperial territories hosted abundant linguistic variety. Roman rule grew to be so extensive that eventually Emperor Diocletian split it in two, a western and eastern empire, during his reign in 285 A.D. The empire's immense expansions brought Romans into direct contact with many different cultures. Based on its location alone, Rome saw the passage of almost all trade across the Mediterranean. Aelius Aristides wrote a eulogy to the city in which he described trade in and out of Rome:

> Everything is shipped to you, from every land and from every sea—the products of each season, of each country, of each river and lake, the crafts of Greeks and other foreigners. As a result, if anyone wants to see all these items, he must either travel through the whole world to behold them, or live in this city.[8]

Rome was quite malleable, often adopting customs from other cultures and absorbing them into their own practices. Even in the sacred realm of religion, Romans seemed to collect new gods

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[7] Daniel P. Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 125.
[8] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 139-140.

like children swapping trading cards.[9] Whichever deities defended popular interests or met the needs of the people were added to the ever-growing list, regardless of their origins. Rome was so receptive that, in 212 A.D., Roman citizenship became available to any freeborn person living within the empire's borders. Despite this generous allocation, many members of the imperial society still suffered from inequity in the eyes of the law and the public.

Roman society was based upon a strict hierarchical class structure. In the simplest form, Romans recognized three social categories: freeborn citizens, slaves, and freed slaves. Official laws served to segregate the individual rights of each of the three categories. Freeborn citizens received the most respect. Slaves were the lowest class in society and suffered great discrimination. Unfortunately, no reform arose over this disparity within the Roman Empire because slavery was economically crucial.[10] Freed slaves were in between; they most likely saved wages from outside jobs and purchased their own freedom. Unregulated bias also surrounded most occupations. Ironically, farmers and laborers were not revered despite ties to the ancestral heroes the Romans so admired. Cicero once made a list of dishonorable jobs in which he identified tax collectors and moneylenders, laborers and mechanics, businessmen and transactional middlemen, as well as positions involving food preparation, like cooks and butchers.[11] Wealthy men who inherited their fortunes looked down upon those who had to work to sustain themselves. Even free men of low social standing felt they were above slaves and others subjected to long hours of manual labor. Slaves in particular, were often dreadfully mistreated. Beatings were not uncommon and slaves found guilty of wrongdoing were crucified

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[9] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 368.
[10] David Matz. *Daily Life of the Ancient Romans*, 13.
[11] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 134.

or sold into gladiatorial shows to be eaten by wild beasts.[12] Maintaining a strict class system helped to keep the empire in control. It also may have aided the desensitization of the common people. Belittling the worth of human beings could potentially lessen one's sense of empathy. Displays of violence in entertainment naturally followed the example of the community standards.

Life in Rome was chaotic. The slaves were working to pay off servitude, the poor were working to feed their families, the lower classes were working to gain wealth, and the wealthy were working to expand control. There were few moments of peace. When the Romans *did* find time to relax, they did so socially. Public bathhouses were very popular. Unlike the bathhouses of ancient Greece, men and women in Rome bathed together. The bathhouses were the perfect way for communities to come together, gossip, catch up, and meet new people. Remnants of communal baths have been found all across Rome and some are still in use within the basements of private homes today. Sports clubs allowed Romans to come together and exercise through jogging, swimming, and various ballgames.[13] Hunting and fishing were common as well. When Romans took time for leisure, more often than not they did so in social activities. These types of activities successfully brought the people together, but they were missing something. The Romans wanted to be entertained, to escape the ordinary, and push the limits. The Romans needed not only a distraction from the stresses of the world around them, but an experience. Above all, in a world beset with uncertainty, the Romans needed a way to feel in control. Deliverance bloomed from two of the most infamous and extreme fields of entertainment the world has ever seen: the circus and the arena.

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[12] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 180.
[13] Ibid., 311.

Various components that made Romans susceptible to the lures of the circus and the arena are apparent in American society today. We, too, enjoy multiple degrees of violence in our entertainment. It is not surprising that, socially, we have a lot in common with the Roman Empire. We are a dominant world power. The Roman Empire lasted over 500 years and controlled roughly the same expanse of land as the United States. We are home to an exceptionally diverse population and have a highly receptive society. America is also largely military-minded, with martial ties all across the globe. Stress abounds in our country over the fact we are on the verge of World War III. Of course, Rome and America have profound differences as well. America is a democratic nation devoid of one omnipotent ruler. Americans take pride in occupations pertaining to business and have high esteem for commercial success. Americans do not adhere to strict hierarchical limits and experience general social mobility and equality.

Using the circus and arena alone as a means of labeling Romans is not a fair claim. Romans were not the first civilization to introduce staged battles—the Etruscans and Celts were known to have gladiatorial games well before the events reached Rome.[14] Every aspect of the social stratum of ancient Rome was conducive with the elements of the circus and the arena. Violence was sewn into every fiber of the Romans' daily lives and, therefore, the games did not incite the same degree of horror as in audiences today. No one forced the Romans to attend the games. They went of their own accord. If the games had been removed, countless citizens would have been out of work and the national economy would have been unable to endure the hit.[15] The spectators would suffer physically and psychologically, as well, because they would lose their

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[14] Matz. *Daily Life of the Ancient Romans*, 105.
[15] Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 2.

essential method of coping with stress. Other violent mediums would surely have been created to fill the void.

Today we have computer generated imaging which essentially does the dirty work for us. We still depict cruel and unnecessary violence in our television shows, movies, applications, and video games yet we feel unattached because we are not inflicting any visible, physical harm. In light of changing societal values—from ancient Rome to now—one may argue the mere enjoyment and viewing of our violent content in television, movies, and games is just as barbarous as the circus and arena games were in their own day and age. Perhaps the only thing that has changed is the medium by which we participate in violence. We crave violence just as desirously and naturally as the Romans did. The ancient Romans in many ways offer us an image of ourselves.

Politics

In the days of the Roman Republic, wealthy citizens organized arena games on their own accord. The games were usually thrown in honor of a deceased family member.[1] The bigger the show the greater the honor bestowed in memory of the deceased. Some families took such considerable expense in the production of a show that, when the games were over, they no longer held the capital to remain in the upper class. The games were also often used for political advantages. Magistrates might throw a few games to earn the favor of the people. Great expenditure was worth the influx of votes sure to follow. Once Rome became an empire, votes were no longer pertinent. Magistrates stopped spending time and money on earning citizen approval through show sponsorship and began seeking titles and distinction in the Senate. All authority now rested in the hands of the emperor. Under imperial control, the games continued to develop as financial support evolved from individual wealth to public funds.

Each emperor knew that, in order to secure his position, he needed to keep the people happy. The best way to achieve this was to continuously deliver exceptional games in the arena. The emperor was expected to create a true experience through organized combat in the arena—just as in his conquests on the battlefield.[2] Some emperors would go to extreme lengths to make their games stand out.[3] Julius Caesar, sometimes referred to as the father of the games, blew many citizens away with one of his shows thrown just before the institution of the empire:

> At an early point in his career when he was trying to gain fame, Caesar put on a gladiatorial show that featured an unheard-of 320 pairs of gladiators. This was supposedly in honor of his father, despite the fact that the elder Caesar had been dead for over 20 years. Whatever the effects on the ghost of Caesar's father, these games made Caesar popular with the people of Rome.[4]

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[1] J. P. V. D. Balsdon. *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome*, 250.
[2] Fik Mejer, and Liz Waters. *The Gladiators*, 234.
[3] Ibid., 143.
[4] Gregory S. Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 121.

Great generosity in the production of arena games rarely went unnoticed. Even emperors—and there were a few—who did not care for the arena attended regularly and feigned interest. Failure to attend on the part of the emperor usually resulted in immense unpopularity in the eyes of his people.[5] It was important to the common people that he not only be present for, but also he enjoy the games, as well. It pleased the lower classes to see the emperor share their interests.[6] For all people, it was important to attend the games as a general tenet of political life in Rome.[7] Romans went not just to see the games, but also to see other people and be seen. Most common citizens essentially were there simply to enjoy the show. The magistrates and wealthy men, on the other hand, mainly appeared to seek high prestige and favorable public opinion. Even without the need for votes, membership in the Senate was a coveted position:

> The Roman senate composed of roughly 300 members, was not an elected body and possessed no legislative powers; rather, its function was mainly advisory. Membership in the senate was obtained by having held one of the higher magistracies, so the senate was composed of ex-magistrates. Membership was for life. Because the senate consisted of Rome's political and financial elite, its advice on matters both domestic and foreign was usually taken seriously.[8]

The emperors did not need votes but they still needed the support of the people. The games were the best way to appease the masses. Eventually, the people saw the games as their intrinsic rights as citizens, no longer a treat from exceptional emperors.[9] The number of events increased substantially in the imperial period for emperors were ever weary of a revolt. The common people may not have held the right to vote for a new leader but, if they all banded together, they could easily rebel. Emperors hoped that spectacular games would distract the

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[5] Carl J. Richard. *Why We're All Romans*, 33.
[6] Jo-Ann Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 351.
[7] Keith Hopkins, and Mary Beard. *The Colosseum*, 41.
[8] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 46.
[9] Daniel P. Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 46.

public and keep attention off of any failures or political concerns.[10] Commemorative games eventually became a thing of the past. The games transformed from a once honorable practice in the name of the dead to an amusement financed by political agendas.[11] The Flavian Amphitheater—commonly referred to today as the Colosseum—was built to fulfill Emperor Vespasian's political motives and to quell civil unrest by symbolizing a return of the land to the people after the reign of Nero.[12] In a similar way, Emperor Domitian later sought political acclaim by enhancing the Flavian amphitheater's amenities:

> Just to the east of the Flavian Amphitheater was a complex known as the Ludus Magnus. This was one of the four gladiator training schools set up by the emperor Domitian to ensure an adequate supply of gladiators for the amphitheater. It included barracks, training facilities, and a small amphitheater that could hold about 3,000 spectators. The entire complex was directly connected to the substructure of the Flavian Amphitheater by an underground tunnel.[13]

This method of controlling pubic opinion through entertainment has not been lost among politicians. The government actively tries to curve public opinion in the United States today.

Modern politicians do not often fund major sporting events or build arenas; however, they *do* use the media as a tool for manipulating the masses. Politicians, like the emperors of ancient Rome, use the media to rack up face time. The Romans went to the arena to see and be seen; so, too, do modern politicians use the media to enhance their image and gain the trust of the public. The arena was the site of many gruesome events that commoners flocked to see. The people felt like they were in the middle of the action due to the added suspense of unscripted events. However, the arena shows were not always as spontaneous as they seemed. Most shows underwent weeks of planning by sponsors and a lot of acts involved the use of hidden pulleys,

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[10] Shelton. *As the Romans Did,* 335.
[11] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 249.
[12] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 125.
[13] Ibid., 128.

stagehands, cages, trap doors, and props to create a specific experience for the audience. Modern politicians, in the same manner, often stage conference and events. Hired people dress or act in certain ways as to be confused for enthusiastic supporters on television. Politicians actively use the media to their advantage.

In many ways, media outlets are the prime source of information for most Americans and television in our society serves a very similar role as the arena did in ancient Rome. The arena was not just a place of amusement. The arena also served as a forum for the common people. In their book, The Colosseum, Keith Hopkins and Mary Beard describe how the arena "stood at the very heart of the delicate balance between Roman autocracy and popular power, an object lesson in Roman imperial statecraft."[14] The emperor was always present at the games and any grievances from the public could be made known. Commoners also wielded a unique authority in the arena. They ultimately chose the fate of the performers and criminals based upon their own interpretation of the facts presented. Today, television—with the added benefit of online media—is our arena. It is how we receive information, choose how to act upon it, and have our voices heard.

Emperors used the arena games as a way to distract the public from less-desirable issues at large. In a similar way, modern politicians and government officials work to manipulate the media by controlling what information we receive.[15] Event coverage and images can be tailored in multiple fashions to initiate different responses. Public affairs personnel are employed for this purpose. They implement whatever means necessary to insure the intended message is being properly conveyed to the media. It is their responsibility to illicit positive responses from the public. Despite political efforts to curve the truth, the media should always strive for journalistic

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[14] Hopkins. *The Colosseum*, 26.
[15] Kristen A. Oswald. "Mass Media and the Transformation of American Politics," 407.

integrity. Some people believe the government directly influences the media to report in their favor. This is certainly true for some outlets and many viewers are very uninformed due to subscription to narrowly tailored news sources. The media market as a whole is very diverse and we are fortunate to live in a country in which freedom of speech is upheld. Unlike in Roman times, we can freely access any sources we so choose, whether they are supportive or critical of politicians and government control.

Religion

Religion in Rome was integral to daily life and played a large role in most Roman behaviors. Before Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official faith of the empire in 380 A.D., Roman religion was not well defined. Romans were polytheistic but, beyond this sole classification, religion in Rome was very ambiguous. Gods and goddesses were constantly changing, evolving, and growing in number. Romans were known to pick up deities from every culture they encountered, especially from the Greeks. Certain religious rites had to be performed without error and sacrifice—the most common form of worship—involved a specific set of directions and chants; any single mistake required the entire rite to be repeated until perfect. A special assembly of carefully selected young women was recruited to serve Vesta—goddess of the hearth and home. These women, known as the Vestal Virgins, were expected to remain virgins and to oversee particular rites and events. The Romans were an extraordinarily superstitious people. Many artifacts remain of curses and incantations written for enemies and lovers alike. Rome was also the home of many cults, the greatest of which commanded military men to dedicate their lives to reverence of the Emperor. Collectively, the Romans were religiously ritualistic. A handful of festivals were held annually to honor the gods. The chariot races and arena shows began as religious institutions, as well. Ultimately, the Romans used religion to fill an essential need absent from their society: a sense of control.

Romans regularly added names to their list of divinities. In times of crisis, the Romans were eager to assume all of the divine help they could get.[1] Romans respected all gods, even those that were completely foreign to them. It was always important not to offend any deity. Romans believed the total number of all gods and goddesses was infinite and that any could

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[1] Jo-Ann Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 369.

greatly impact the world around them. For this reason, the Romans practiced a ritual known as the *evocatio* that involved offering formal invitations to the gods of their enemies before an attack.[2] The Romans prayed to the enemies' gods to abandon their people and switch allegiance to the Romans. In return, the Romans promised to worship the new gods in Rome. For the most part, Romans in the Republic were not oppressive over which gods people chose to worship.[3] Persecutions began in the imperial period, however, because Romans had a hard time comprehending monotheism. Before Constantine, Christianity and Judaism crossed the line of Roman tolerance.[4] Romans were accustomed to devotion to a great number of deities, not one omnipotent god. The number of Roman gods that were in circulation is incalculable today, but most likely extended well into the hundreds and even thousands.[5] Of all those appropriated, the most common deities coincided with the gods of ancient Greece:

> The most prominent Roman gods were what might be termed the Olympian gods. This set of deities, derived from the Greek gods said to live on Mount Olympus, included Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Venus, Neptune, Apollo, Diana, Ceres, Bacchus, Mercury, Minerva, Vesta, and Vulcan. The most important of these for the Romans were Jupiter, the king of the gods, and Mars, the god of war, both of whom were thought to be especially interested in the success of Rome.[6]

Not all borrowed gods, however, were copied completely. In the case of the Greek gods, it is often inaccurately assumed that the Romans simply adopted the deities fully without prior connections. In reality, Roman religion often lacked in mythological aspects and the Romans integrated the Greek myths that coincided with their own established gods and goddesses.[7] It just so happened that the Greeks and Romans had similar deities, which encompassed very broad

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[2] Gregory S. Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 141.
[3] Tenney Frank. *Aspects of Social Behavior in Ancient Rome*, 42.
[4] Ibid., 164.
[5] Ibid., 142.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Kevin McGeough. *The Romans*, 180.

spectrums of rule. Religiously, the two civilizations proved to be individualized yet exceedingly relatable.

Unlike the lax rules on which gods to worship, the practice of specific rites was highly regulated. Certain procedures required ultimate perfection or would be invalid. Romans believed gods might even be angered should a rite be botched and so, most times, rites were repeated until flawless. Sacrifice was one of the most common practices and demanded textbook precision. Every detail—the animal's coloration, sex, size, health, heredity, and temperament—had to be ideal for the offering. Accuracy was key:

> Once the animal had been led to the altar, a prayer was recited following the usual prayer formula of invocation of the deity's name, the geographic locations associated with the deity, and the actual request being made. If it was a large animal, one of the priest's attendants struck it on the head with a hammer or axe, and then another cut its throat. They cut upward if it was for a god of the skies, downward if it was for a god of the underworld. The kill needed to be done cleanly and efficiently. If it was performed sloppily, it was a bad omen.[8]

Any and all mistakes warranted repetition of the ceremony. Priests often gave an extra prayer prior to the sacrifice to further compensate for potential errors.[9]

Men dominated religious positions in ancient Rome. Women had few options in the performing of rites. However, a very small number of Roman women were chosen to enter a religious order as Vestal Virgins. Vestal Virgins were public priestesses yet they lived secluded from the rest of society. The Vestal Virgins were so named for their dedication to the goddess Vesta. Vesta was the goddess of the hearth in the home and, collectively, the success of the city of Rome. Many families paid homage to Vesta in their own homes. The Vestal Virgins greatest role was tending to a sacred flame in the temple of Vesta, where they resided.[10] The ever-burning

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[8] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 147.
[9] Ibid., 148.
[10] Sarolta A. Takács. *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 29.

flame signified the continued success of Rome. The Vestal Virgins also oversaw and participated in a diverse number of annual festivals and rituals. The Vestal Virgins were selected from all Roman citizens. Six women were chosen to carry on the duties necessary to insure proper tribute to Vesta. Service consisted of thirty years. Selection was very specific:

> Membership was selected by the pontifex maximus [the highest-ranking chief pontiff][11] from girls of patrician [wealthy class] families, ages six to ten. These girls had to take a vow of chastity and remain virgins for thirty years, after which they were released from service. After thirty years, the woman could choose whether to continue in service, and it is assumed that most did.[12]

Service to Vesta was divided into three parts. In the first ten years the girls learned how to perform their duties, the second ten years were devoted to practicing those duties, and in the third ten years the experienced Vestal Virgins taught the newcomers to the order.[13] The biggest crime a Vestal Virgin could commit was to break her vow of chastity. Vestal Virgins found guilty were buried alive. There was no excuse, in the eyes of the Romans, for letting a man come in between a Vestal Virgin and her duty of honoring Vesta. The Romans believed a deflowered Vestal Virgin would anger Vesta and lead to corruption of the state of Rome. The Romans were so superstitious that accusations of Vestal Virgin promiscuity often followed major setbacks in Rome's imperial ventures. Outside of celibacy, the Vestal Virgins held many more freedoms than most other women in Roman society. Vestal virgins received a large compensation at the beginning and end of their service and also were, unlike any other citizen in the Empire, free from paternal control.[14] Vestal Virgins also held reserved seating in the lowest level of the Colosseum—a much better view than that of all other women in the highest level of the arena.[15]

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[11] McGeough. *The Romans*, 193.
[12] Ibid., 195.
[13] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City,* 155.
[14] Takács. *Vestal Virgins, Sibyls, and Matrons*, 81-82.
[15] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 127.

Many aspects of daily religious practices of the common people in Rome were motivated by superstition. Kiosks lined most streets selling magical amulets, charms, and potions.[16] Superstitious beliefs and phrases in use today trace back to ancient Rome:

> Amateur incantations were common for everyday occurrences. Some amulets were inscribed with the magical word *Abraxus*, which has been passed down to the present day as 'abracadabra'; in Christian times, ritual formulae could also be turned to magical purposes, for example the intonation *hoc est corpus* ('this is the body'); this gives the modern term 'hocus pocus.'[17]

Curses, spells, and incantations were very popular. Romans believed they could inflict harm on others through magic and sorcery. Archaeologists have found many such incantations. People used curses to incite harm upon their enemies. Paid sorcerers commonly wrote such curses on tablets.[18] Curses were exceptionally common at chariot races—the true passion of all Romans. Dedication to each faction—the teams of charioteers and horses distinguished by color—spanned generations. Romans certainly did not take losses lightly. It is not surprising that Romans would seek supernatural sabotage to help their faction win. Rivals would often cast spells on tablets to impair an opponent.[19] This apparently became such a problem that, in 389 A.D., a public ordinance forbade using magic on charioteers and horses.[20] Love incantations were also common. Romans believed a proper spell could spare them from unrequited love. Romans found all sorts of instances in which to invoke spells and incantations. It was one way to make them feel somewhat in control of their lives.

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[16] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 13.
[17] Ibid., 15.
[18] Ibid., 149.
[19] J. P.V. D. Balsdon. *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome*, 318.
[20] Ibid., 319.

The emperors used religion as a way to coordinate Roman loyalty. Religious practices were closely linked to social identity.[21] All soldiers, upon entering service, shifted their religious affiliations to better suit military life. Soldiers were strongly encouraged to pledge allegiance and worship to Jupiter, the emperor, and the eternity of Rome. [22] The emperor was believed to be the empire incarnate.[23] In order to fully serve the state of Rome and the gods, a soldier had to dedicate himself to the emperor. Unlike the cults of civilian life, the cult of the military was mandatory. Numerous specified rituals and ceremonies were performed to not only prompt regular commitment to the emperor but to also bring the men together in unity and lighten the burden of war.[24] Whether or not the soldiers truly worshipped the emperor outside of the required rituals, the military cult still served as an ideal method of bringing the men under one order and giving them one unified image—Rome personified as the emperor—to fight for.

Roman citizens, abroad and in Rome, found a sense of control through religion. By keeping an open mind to new deities, being sure to offer perfect sacrifices, instating professional priests and pontifaces, choosing virgins to maintain eternal flames, paying sorcerers to cheat fate, and entrusting all battles to the gods, Romans felt in better control of the future. Unlike the beliefs of the Greeks, Romans did not see the gods as divine beings that interfered with worldly affairs out of spite. Romans saw the gods as a sort of power to tap in to; an eternal source of grace accessible through perfected communication in sacrifice and other rituals.[25] Religion for the Romans was not how we would recognize religion today. We tend to associate it with sets of guidelines dictating proper ethical and moral standards. To the Romans, ethics did not fall under

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[21] David J. Mattingly. *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, 226.
[22] Robert C. Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 224-225.
[23] Ibid., 225.
[24] Ibid., 226.
[25] McGeough. *The Romans*, 184.

the realm of religion; the gods did not care if a man was ethically *good*. The gods favored scrupulous rituals and precise prayers.[26] In this way, the Romans felt that proper adherence to the worship of numerous gods and participation in organized rituals gave them greater control in their chaotic world.

[26] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 373.

Competition

It is all fun and games until somebody gets hurt. This adage is pretty common nowadays but it seems the opposite was true in the minds of the ancient Romans. Romans thrived on violence. Once safety was thrown to the wind, things were just starting to get interesting. As discussed earlier, the use of violence as entertainment in Rome was inevitable due to a number of social variables. The Romans certainly had a sizeable sum of violent pastimes to choose from. Given the numerous executions, beast fights, and gladiatorial games available to the Romans, one might think the arena was the favored location of leisure. However, the circus was in fact the number one recreation of Rome. Chariot races captivated the attention of Romans like no other event. The citizens of the empire took nothing more seriously than competition; from the games of children to the mortal combat of professional gladiators, it was integral to Roman society. Whether in the circus, the arena, or in unorganized bouts, nothing surpassed the attraction of competition as the driving force of Roman entertainment.

In practice, chariot racing was very similar to modern day horse and dog races; in essence, however, the experience was much more relatable to modern day sporting events like professional American football.[1] Chariot racing brought together all levels of Roman society. Men and women, free and slave, even emperors were fans of the races.[2] Admission was open to anyone and races were held frequently. Up to twenty-four races were likely to run in the course of a holiday.[3] Races could be very diverse. Chariots ranged from those with only two horses to some capable of occupying ten. Most, however, used four-horse chariots. One complete race consisted of seven laps up and down a divided track with thirteen turns around two opposite

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[1] Jo-Ann Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 354.
[2] J. P. V. D. Balsdon. *Life and Leisure in Ancient Rome*, 314.
[3] Ibid., 320.

posts. Seems simple enough but these events were extremely dangerous and it was not uncommon for charioteers to be seriously injured or killed.

Fans did not follow particular horses or charioteers but, rather, were dedicated to teams known as factions. Four factions existed in the chariot races—Red, White, Blue, and Green. These were the colors displayed on tunics worn by each charioteer. Factions were a serious matter. Fans did not jump back and forth between teams. Faction affiliations were for life. Pliny, discussing the ridiculousness of racing fans, wrote,

> Now, if they were attracted by the speed of the horses or the skill of the drivers, this would not be unreasonable. But, as it is, they are interested only in team uniforms. It's the team colors they love. In fact, if, during the race itself, right in the middle of the race, the team colors were suddenly switched, the spectators would immediately transfer their interest and support, and abandon those drivers and those horses which they recognized from afar and whose names they had been shouting just a moment before.[4]

Faction support was passed from generation to generation. It may seem odd to follow a color with no reasoning toward skill but it is comparable to modern sports fans. Americans are likely to follow teams solely due to family ties and location. Even when a team is chosen based on skill eventually the fanatics stick with them through thick or thin (well, at least they *should* by popular standards). Football fans don't often change teams when their favorite quarterback gets traded; likewise, racing fans stayed loyal to their respective factions regardless of specific charioteers or horses. In another parallel to American football, chariot teams were owned by outside businessmen. Magistrates or other wealthy citizens managed the teams and owned the equipment, horses, and even the charioteers. Charioteers were often slaves. A successful slave could earn his freedom by saving his portion of winnings. A few slaves achieved freedom and still decided to continue racing.[5]

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[4] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 355.
[5] Ibid.

Owning a faction was an exceptionally fruitful venture. Sponsors certainly earned back their investments through spectator gambling and victory purses. Almost all Romans loved the races and regularly attended the circus. Circuses were built all over the Roman Empire. The largest racetrack was the Circus Maximus. It seated around 250,000 spectators whereas the Colosseum only had seats for around 50,000.[6] Races were held very often and took such precedence over all other responsibilities that, by one account, the citizens of Carthage actively ignored an attack by German troops for they were in the middle of watching a chariot race.[7] Perhaps not all spectators would have ignored an enemy at their walls, but the races did seem to inspire abnormal conduct. Spectators tended to sit with those of like factions. As is apparent in modern day sports mania, disputes sometimes arose between oppositions. Fights must have been fairly frequent because soldiers were stationed throughout the Circus Maximus to maintain control.[8] The crowds could get so rowdy that sometimes races were stopped and re-run due to outcries from the seats.[9] A day in the stands must have been loud, crowded, and chaotic; in other words, like an experience at a modern American sporting event.

Gambling was a consistent craze at the races.[10] Devoted to their factions, men were more than willing to bet their earnings at the races. It was a highly popular pastime in many local bars and inns, as well.[11] Games of dice and knucklebones were played indoors and out. Carvings have been found on the steps of ancient public buildings where games were played.[12] The lower

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[6] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 344.
[7] Daniel P. Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 22.
[8] Shelton. *As the Romans Did*, 354.
[9] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 318.
[10] Carl J. Richard. *Why We're All Romans*, 33.
[11] Gregory S. Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 229.
[12] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 158.

classes, in particular, greatly enjoyed betting on cock and quail fighting.[13] Gladiatorial combat was another frequent gambling hotspot. Game sponsors held a special dinner the night before arena events.[14] These dinners were a pre-battle offering to the gladiators who, oddly enough, dined all together despite their looming roles as fatal opponents. The dinners were open to the public and were a perfect conduit through which serious gamblers could get a good look at the competitors before placing their wagers.

Beyond the thrill of gambling, wealthy young men often complained about the lack of opportunities for non-professionals to partake in the races.[15] Circus races were not open to amateurs. Spectators sought not only entertainment but also a chance to intervene. To make competition more immersive public events were held outside of the circuses that were open to all. The oldest competitions in Rome were hunting, riding horses, and men in armed combat.[16] Matches of boxing, running, wrestling, weightlifting, swimming, jumping, a variety of ball games, and throwing discus or javelin were also popular among the able.[17] When such competitions became benign, the arena offered opportunities for amateurs to raise their stakes. Any free man could sign a contract to be a gladiator.[18]

Gladiators were just as much entertainers as they were trained fighters. Like the chariot races, the gladiatorial games were above all a business. Gladiators, either slaves or willing free men, were of great expense. Many attended gladiatorial schools for a number a years, received countless hours of professional training, were housed, fed, and treated for injury, and were rented

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[13] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 152.
[14] Nigel B. Crowther. *Sport in Ancient Times*, 108.
[15] Balsdon. *Life and Leisure*, 323.
[16] Ibid., 253.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Robert C. Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 266.

for events.[19] Gladiatorial fights could either occur between men or between a man and a beast. The closest modern sport to gladiatorial combat is professional wrestling.[20] Of course, unlike modern wrestling, gladiators who lost fights paid with their lives. The connection, however, is still very strong because in both instances combatants are trained in violence and called on to appease the vicious cravings of the crowd.

Some gladiators viewed the games as a dead end. Many of the slaves had no choice but to fight and even some of the volunteers eventually regretted signing their contracts. Not many gladiators expected to retire and spend the rest of their days living in comfort (although, this may have been the case for a rare and lucky few). The main purpose of the games, after all, was death. Training did nothing more but postpone the inevitable.[21] For others, often the more successful fighters, the matches were much more than a bloody part to play. Slaves and voluntary men of lower class saw the games as a ticket to greatness. No longer would social standing or circumstance hold them down. A winning gladiator could become a star. It is easy to forget these fighters were ordinary men that most often came from humble beginnings:

> Can we not view these gifted athletes—for that is surely what they were—as human beings not all that different from their counterparts in any other era in history: men who had wives and children and the obligation to support them, while at the same time providing a few hours of excitement on a hot summer afternoon for tens of thousands of their fellow Romans.[22]

The games offered a unique opportunity for glory and fame. Victors also earned large sums of money. The arena was the only place where a slave or poor man with no future could fight for their one shot at social mobility. Today, modern athletics offer a similar opportunity to gifted athletes. Americans in particular, in the country of opportunity, always appreciate stories of an

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[19] Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 268.
[20] Paul Plass. *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome*, 27.
[21] Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 204.
[22] David Matz. *Daily Life of the Ancient Romans*, 108.

individual's climb from rags to riches. High school and college sports offer scholarships for exceptional athletes in need of financial assistance. Modern athletic programs and ancient gladiatorial schools both offer talented individuals the means to rise through the ranks in their respective societies.

As a highly militaristic society, most Romans knew how to defend themselves and could appreciate the techniques and prowess of the gladiators. In a way, the arena was an amplification of Romans in battle.[23] Abroad, the battlefield was unpredictable. In the arena, however, spectators held exclusive influence in the outcome of the gladiatorial events. Throughout the competitions, viewers were prone to pick favorites. If a beloved fighter should fall the crowd could decide to spare his life. Adversely, disapproval from the crowd could condemn a gladiator, even if he were victorious. The emperor was present at the games and proclaimed the consensus of the crowd. Spectators either motioned a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. In this way, the spectators took the fate of the fighters into their own hands.

The excitement and ecstasy associated with the ancient Roman competitive events have been imitated in America today and have proved to be just as successful among the public as in Roman imperial times. Keying in to the three elements of consumption, distraction, and power, the American oasis of Las Vegas has in many ways attempted to borrow from and improve upon the model of ancient Rome. Roman characteristics are prevalent in Caesars Palace, the Bellagio, the Forum, and the Venetian.[24] Caesars Palace and the Forum Shops, in particular, attract Americans in the same way the original counterparts attracted Romans—by offering an escape. Las Vegas perpetuated the Hollywood image of imperial Rome as a sumptuous society ruled by

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[23] Fik Meijer, and Liz Waters. *The Gladiators*, 234.
[24] Gregory A. Borchard, and Anthony J. Ferri. "When in Las Vegas," 729.

pleasure and indulgence.[25] Far from factual representation, Caesars Palace offers an intentionally skewed view of Rome:

> The interior of the Palace is like a pastiche of film sets from the Hollywood spectaculars set in imperial Rome: sumptuous black and red Italian marble columns trimmed with white marble and gold leaf ring the casino, classical statuary and marble friezes depicting scenes from Roman history adorn the walls (Roman military conquests and women as booty are frequent motifs), guests are served cocktails by gladiators and goddesses, and at the Bacchanal Restaurant patrons are greeted by Caesar and Cleopatra (whose costumes are a fusion of Hollywood spectacular and Las Vegas showtime) and enjoy a Roman "orgy" served by centurions and goddesses.[26]

The Forum shops, although more accurate than Caesars Palace in design and architectural features, distort the original purpose of the Roman Forum. The replica of the once great mecca of political and economic life in Rome is no more than a themed strip mall. There, Americans do what we do best—shop. In a way, one could argue the forums *do* represent the integral interests of their respective societies: Romans were driven by imperial success while extreme capitalism seems to be the new American hobby. We buy, buy, buy and spend, spend, spend to avoid a feeling of helplessness. The elements of distraction and power go hand in hand in both the Roman arenas and the Las Vegas attractions. As previously discussed, the games and races were a popular way for magistrates and emperors to earn esteem. The events were used to engross the attention of the public and shield citizens from present social and economic issues. In the same way, the Las Vegas replicas of ancient Rome aim to disarm the guests of their full rational capabilities. The Las Vegas attractions seek to distract us by creating alternate worlds where we are more comfortable and less cautious. Hedonistic modes of quenching our cravings—sex, consumption, gambling—are posed as common and valued by successful societies such as

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[25] Margaret Malamud. "As the Romans Did?" 13.
[26] Ibid.

imperial Rome.[27] The Roman emperors and modern corporations recognize and exploit the power of distraction.[28] In a fantastical setting, such as Caesars Palace, surrounded by thematic splendor and endless luxuries, it is much easier for guests to loosen the grip on their wallets. In the imitation of Rome, Las Vegas has and continues to successfully transcend tourists to alternate realities.[29] *When in Rome* has evolved in to *What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas*.

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[27] Ibid., 25.
[28] Borchard. "When in Las Vegas," 725.
[29] Ibid., 722.

Spectacle

What is so special about the Romans? Why has their culture sparked curiosity century after century? Why do studies continue to analyze the Roman society when sources already abound? One of the most common reasons we always look back upon the Romans, in both wonder and disdain, is due to their uncanny and unprecedented passion for spectacle. The Romans of the imperial period lived for amusement. In a chaotic world, the arena was the prime location of diversion and relief from the trials of everyday life—that is, for the spectators. An immense number of people and beasts to enter the arena never made their way out. It was the site of constant carnage; an institution purely designed to satiate the most basic human cravings for consumption. No desire was too extreme and excess was encouraged. The Romans are worth review for they organized the largest and most violent attractions and entertainments the world has ever seen.

The Romans were ruthless, renowned, and proud. The arena replaced the forum of the Roman Republic. Civilized elections and gatherings of intellectual and political discussion made way for the era of imperial rule and sponsored public games. Here, the public were regularly in assembly with the emperor and could ultimately curve event outcomes simply through mass objections. In the arena, the average Roman experienced greater persuasive power than any other realm. Despite this small victory, the emperors surreptitiously used the games to sway popular opinion and quell civil unrest. The games were always designed with tight schedules to keep attentions occupied.[1] The dates of spectacles were also strategically presented to coincide with periods in which the community was on the brink disorder or discontent. The games also served as an ideal opportunity for the emperors to gain the favor of the people. Emperor Vespasian, for

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[1] Daniel P. Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 65.

example, sponsored the construction of the Colosseum in 70 A.D. as a gift to the people of Rome. The donation was more of a political ploy than a genuine offering to the public. Previously between 64-68 A.D., the infamous emperor Nero began construction of a massive project known as the "Golden House" to serve as his personal palace:

> At the time of Nero's death, construction [of the palace] had not yet finished, but the parts already completed were impressive enough. These included a triple colonnade that extended for an entire mile, an artificial lake in the valley where the Flavian Amphitheater [more commonly referred to as the Colosseum] would later be built, elaborate pavilions and gardens stocked with a variety of exotic wild animals, and a huge complex of over 140 rooms to be used for hosting feasts and dinner parties. At the dedication of this extraordinary set of structures, Nero's comment was, "Finally I can begin to live like a human being" (Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 31).[2]

Nero perfectly personified the imperial demand for extravagance and some believe he started the Great Fire of Rome in order to clear ground for his future estate. To signify a new era, Emperor Vespasian destroyed Nero's progress and deliberately built the Colosseum in its place. Vespasian not only hoped to ruin Nero's imperial legacy, but also to ensure positive public response to the future reign of his son, Titus. Vespasian succeeded in winning over the people as well as the empire for his son. Vespasian was not the only emperor to seek favor through public works. Many emperors funded elaborate shows to impress and captivate their audiences. Some would stop at nothing, often blowing outrageous amounts of community funds, to make sure their spectacles were unparalleled. Arena events quickly evolved into larger than life displays. Originally, the games were relatively non-violent. One of the first shows in 238 B.C. resembled something close to a modern day circus with trained animals, acrobats, tightrope walkers, and mild athletic events.[3] With mounting competition and the restlessness of the crowds bearing upon the sponsors, boundaries disappeared.

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[2] Gregory S. Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 168.
[3] Mannix. *The Way of the Gladiator*, 7.

Romans lived in a highly militaristic and violent society. It seemed only natural that their entertainments reach a similar intensity. Various modes of what we today refer to as capital punishment became commonplace in the arena. Originally, only convicted criminals or prisoners of war were slaughtered in spectacles. It was not until the late imperial period that Romans began to persecute Christians, as well as any and all others found guilty of crimes against the Empire.[4] Christians were often led into the arena at noon—the scheduled time for executions—to have their throats cut like common criminals in Rome.[5] The Romans were very imaginative in their punishments. Throat cutting was perhaps considered rather mild compared to the vast array of options:

> The standard punishments were fines, flogging, decapitation, crucifixion (for incest, treason, and for slaves who had revolted), or burning (for treachery and arson). Citizens could also be stripped of their status as citizens and become slaves or gladiators. Another punishment was to be sent to the mines, which entailed incredibly hard and dangerous labor; this really amounted to a delayed death sentence. A final option was exile. The Romans termed this to be "interdicted from fire and water." It was a capital offense to help or harbor an exile, and if an exile returned, he could be killed without impunity.[6]

Many punishments were highly specialized according to the crime committed. Vestal Virgins, for instance, underwent a full funeral procession and were buried alive if caught unchaste. It is hard to imagine persecutions and punishments today taking place in an entertainment venue. Unfortunately, terrorist groups such as ISIS actually *do* perform such demonstrations in sports arenas. For our understanding in comparison to the American legal system, however, some clarifications should be made when reviewing the Romans:

> In particular, it is important to separate the arena as an execution venue from the arena as a contest venue. Romano-Greeks firmly believed in the necessity and efficacy of painful, brutal death for those ordinary people condemned for serious antisocial behavior such as murder. Thus crucifixion, burning alive, and condemnation to be torn to pieces by wild

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[4] Tenney Frank. *Aspects of Social Behavior in Ancient Rome*, 42.
[5] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 124.
[6] Ibid., 105.

> beasts or killed by fellow prisoners featured strongly in their capital-punishment universe. In these cases the combination of spectacle meant to deter others and the reestablishment of social order by brutalizing those who had brutalized that order appealed very strongly to their sense of justice and order.[7]

At times the crowd called for more excitement and those awaiting execution sometimes found themselves the victims of horrendous sentences, such as being strapped unarmed to ravenous animals or, for women, being raped by trained beasts.

The wrath of the Romans was not limited to humans. Of course, any punishments upon people that included animals were a cruel punishment upon the animals as well. Emperors and sponsors prided themselves on their exotic repertoire of beasts. Lions, giraffes, crocodiles, elephants, bears, ostriches, hippopotamuses, leopards, and tigers (to name a few) were all displayed in the Colosseum. Animals were purchased from foreign markets and poachers at great expense. No price was too high to risk disappointing the masses. The Romans enjoyed a steady supply of beasts from their conquests in Egypt and North Africa.[8] A few thousand animals could be slaughtered in just one day of games. These numbers combined with the many more that never even made it to Rome due to poor conditions on the long journeys, occasionally resulted in endangerment and even the complete loss of species.

The games were always conducted under a tight schedule with animal acts in the morning and executions at noon. In the afternoon, it was time for the gladiators to take the stage. This was the spectacle of all spectacles; the main event that everyone came to see. It reflected poorly upon sponsors or emperors when their gladiators were untrained or lacked enthusiasm. It was key to have skillful and fervent fighters to keep the crowd entertained. Socially, gladiators played a very

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[7] Robert C. Knapp. *Invisible Romans*, 265-266.
[8] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 134.

strange role in Roman society.[9] Most were slaves and, therefore, were not highly thought of. However, if they were successful and won many battles, gladiators eventually earned great acclaim. Under the emperor, successful gladiators were perhaps the closest people to modern celebrities. Women, specially, were reported to swoon at the sight of a beloved gladiator. Juvenal recounts, in a poem, the tale of a married woman who ran off with a gladiator:

> For the sweet Sergius long had scrap'd his throat,
> Long look'd for leave to quit the public stage,
> Maim'd in his limbs, and verging new age.
> Add, that his face was batter'd and decay'd;
> The helmet of his brow huge galls had made,
> A wen deformed his nose, of monstrous size,
> And sharp rheum trickl'd from his bloodshot eyes;
> But then he was a SWORDSMAN! That alone
> Made every charm and every grace his own;
> That made him dearer than her nuptial vows,
> Dearer than country, sister, children, spouse—
> 'TIS BLOOD THEY LOVE: Let Sergius quit the sword,
> And he'll appear at once—so like her lord.[10]

As Juvenal so eloquently described, women seemed to be defenseless against their attraction to men who lived by the sword. It is unclear if this infatuation was true for all warriors in the empire, but accounts seem to point repeatedly to gladiators. The very word 'gladiator' had a highly sensual connotation in ancient Rome:

> The strongest image of the gladiator in Roman culture…was as a virile sex-symbol…'steel's what they [the women] crave.' The Latin is 'ferrum'—literally 'iron' or 'sword.' Another common Latin term for sword (and one embedded in the word 'gladiator' itself) was 'gladius'—which was also Latin street talk for 'penis.' The point about the gladiator is that he was, for better or worse, as one modern historian has aptly put it, 'all sword.'[11]

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[9] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 125.
[10] J. P. V. D. Balsdon. *Roman Women*, 281.
[11] Keith Hopkins, and Mary Beard. *The Colosseum*, 81-82.

Phallic imagery and eroticism was rampant throughout Roman society and is depicted on numerous wall carvings, tools, art pieces, pots, vases, bowls, lamps, etc. You could say the Romans popular culture was particularly pornographic.[12]

Unfortunately, this chapter does not shine the kindest light upon the Romans. It does, however, illuminate key elements to explain the success of the spectacles. These elements play big roles in attracting audiences to modern forms of entertainment, as well. First, the Romans needed an escape. The games thrived because Rome was a tumultuous society plagued by endless stress. The Romans needed a distraction and to feel, if only for a temporary period, like fate was in their own hands. The Romans gave way to the illusions presented at the games and transcended their immediate environments. In the arena, they were in control. This feeling of control is a crucial component of modern media. The American market is highly specialized; we choose which media to watch and we are driven by individualism. Netflix is a great modern example. It caters to our personal preferences and even suggests new programs we may like. We also are completely in control of when, where, and how long we watch content. The old method of following set televised schedules has become outdated to accommodate the growing demands of audiences. Our second connection to the Romans is the preference for collective experiences. The ancient games originated as religious rituals and ceremonies that connected the community to the deities. The arena physically brought the Romans into one location and served as a combined encounter they could all share. Today, sports are the greatest example of widespread and communal American entertainment. Americans travel all across the nation or tune in every week to follow their favorite competitors. Our modern day sports events and athletes correlate to

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[12] Aldrete. *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 117.

the arena and gladiators of ancient Rome. One last connection was the fundamental human wants entertainment fills for people.

Conclusion

The arena supplied a means by which the Romans could satisfy their deepest and most carnal desires. No greater release came from allowing even their basest passions guide their actions. Today, we may feel as though we are highly civilized compared to the vicious Romans; however, the entertainment we enjoy shows otherwise. Although we may not tolerate modern gladiatorial matches or executions, we seem to be unfazed by equally gruesome performances in our video games, television shows, and movies. Is it okay to enjoy detailed and gory renditions of real events as long as no people were harmed? Are our consciences clear and our morals sound if we revel in intricate productions involving the uncensored display of topics such as sex, rape, murder, torture, death, battles, etc.? Should the line be drawn at physical harm to actors and participants or at mental harm of the audience? Although at times it is hard to see, the Romans shared a very similar society and culture to our own. We should not be quick to condemn their habits before properly assessing our own.

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